

Available online at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)**ScienceDirect**

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 212 (2015) 237 – 241

---

**Procedia**  
Social and Behavioral Sciences

---

33rd International Conference of the Spanish Association of Applied Linguistics (AESLA):  
Multimodal Communication in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Professional and Academic Challenges

## The role of cognitive operations in the translation of film titles

Isabel Negro Alousque\*

*Universidad Complutense, Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales, Campus de Somosaguas, Pozuelo de Alarcón 28223 (Madrid),  
Spain*

---

### Abstract

The translation of film titles is not simply a linguistic matter, i.e. a transfer of words from one language to another language that looks for the most appropriate equivalent. It is determined by other factors such as the cultural component and the aim to catch the audience's attention, which explain the use of translation techniques other than literal translation and zero translation. The present paper seeks to show the role of cognitive operations such as those proposed by Ruiz de Mendoza and Galera (2014) in the translation of English film titles into Spanish and French. We have gathered a corpus of 100 English titles and the corresponding Spanish and French titles. The comparative analysis suggests that, although the original titles are often kept in the other languages or literally translated, sometimes the translation is accounted for in terms of five cognitive operations: expansion, reduction, strengthening, mitigation or parametrization.

© 2015 Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license  
(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Peer-review under responsibility of the Scientific Committee of the XXXIII AESLA CONFERENCE

*Keywords:* translation; film titles; cognitive operation; source language; target language.

---

### 1. Introduction

Translation is not just a matter of linguistics, i.e. a simple transfer of words from one language onto the other that looks for the closest equivalence. It is a process determined by factors such as the cultural component, the aim of attracting the audience's interest and the translators' competence. A great deal of research into translation has focused on the range of techniques used to render source language words into the target language, and many

---

\*\* Isabel Negro. Tel.: +0034-636525037; fax +0034-913942351.  
E-mail address: [inegro@ccee.ucm.es](mailto:inegro@ccee.ucm.es).

taxonomies have been put forward (e.g. Newmark 1991, Hurtado 2001).

The translation of English film titles has received scholarly attention in the last years (e.g. Jiménez 1997; Díaz 1997; Navarro 1997; Santaemilia 2000; Serrano 2001; Hernández & Mendiluce 2005; Luján 2010). The research issues have been the factors conditioning translation (closeness to the source, commercial effects and cultural awareness) and the common translation techniques. The main translation techniques are presented and exemplified below:

1. Zero translation:  
*Redirected*  
*Mud*  
*Boyhood*  
*Trash*
2. Literal translation:  
*Night at the Museum*      *Noche en el museo*      *La nuit au musée*  
*Guardians of the Galaxy*      *Guardianes de la galaxia*      *Les gardiens de la galaxie*  
*The King's Speech*      *El discurso del rey*      *Le discours d'un roi*
3. Adaptation:  
*The Bucket List*      *Antes de partir*      *Sans plus attendre*  
*Still Life*      *Nunca es demasiado tarde*      *Une belle fin*  
*50 First Dates*      *Como si fuera la primera vez*      *Amour et amnésie*

In the present paper we claim that film adaptations can reflect conceptual patterns. We explore the role of cognitive operations such as those proposed by Ruiz de Mendoza and Galera (2014) in the translation of titles of British and American films into Spanish and French. We take a look at the translation of film titles from the perspective of Cognitive Linguistics. A cognitive approach to translation has developed in recent years (see Rojo & Ibarretxe-Antuñano 2013 for an overview of the latest developments). Within this framework we describe and exemplify cognitive operations that motivate the translation of film titles from English into Spanish and French.

Following Ruiz de Mendoza and Galera (2014) cognitive operations are mental mechanisms which allow us to understand linguistic production and interpretation. The authors make a distinction between formal and content cognitive operations. Whereas formal operations enable us to access, select, abstract and integrate conceptual structure and can stand by themselves, content operations can be classified according to two basic relations, the identity (A IS B) and the 'stands for' (A FOR B) relations, as shown in table 1:

A IS B	A FOR B
Comparison Resemblance Contrast	Expansion
Strengthening	Reduction
Mitigation	Parametrization
Echoing	Saturation
Correlation	Correlation

Table 1. Content cognitive operations (Ruiz de Mendoza & Galera 2014)

Brief descriptions of all the operations are provided below:

Resemblance: A IS B, where A and B designate entities/states of affairs that resemble.

Contrast: A IS B, where A is the opposite of some aspects of B.

Strengthening: A is a point in a scale and B is an upper-level point in the same scale.

Mitigation: A is a point in a scale and B is a lower-level point in the same scale

Echoing: A IS B, where A designates an entity/state of affairs that contradicts the hearer's thoughts about the entity/state of affairs; B echoes such thoughts.\*

Expansion: A FOR B, where A is the whole domain and B is a part of it.

---

\* Echoing gives rise to irony.

Reduction: A FOR B, where A is part of a domain and B is the whole domain.

Parametrization: A is a generic domain and B is a specific subdomain.

Saturation: B completes A, where B is syntactically and semantically coherent with A.

Correlation: A IS/FOR B, where A and B designate co-occurring events in our experience.

The role of the cognitive operations above mentioned is discussed in the remainder of the paper.

## 2. Analysis of film titles

Of the cognitive operations that express an identity relation, strengthening and mitigation play a role in the translation of a number of titles. Consider the following examples:

<i>12 Angry Men</i>	<i>12 Hombres sin Piedad</i>	<i>12 Angry Men</i>
<i>True lies</i>	<i>Mentiras arriesgadas</i>	<i>True lies</i>
<i>Inglourious Basterds</i>	<i>Malditos bastardos</i>	<i>Inglourious Basterds</i>
<i>About a boy</i>	<i>Un gran chico</i>	<i>Pour un garçon</i>
<i>Beverly Hills Cop</i>	<i>Superdetective en Hollywood</i>	<i>Le flic de Beverly Hills</i>
<i>The other guys</i>	<i>The other guys</i>	<i>Very bad cops</i>
<i>Neighbors</i>	<i>Malditos vecinos</i>	<i>Nos pires voisins</i>
<i>Carriers</i>	<i>Infectados</i>	<i>Infectés</i>
<i>Domestic disturbance</i>	<i>El enemigo en casa</i>	<i>L'intrus</i>
<i>A very bad trip</i>	<i>Resacón en Las Vegas</i>	<i>A very bad trip</i>

Some words in the Spanish titles strengthen the meaning of source words. Thus, the adjective 'angry' is translated by *sin piedad* 'ruthless'; 'true lies' become risky (*arriesgadas*) and the soldiers in the film *Inglorious Basterds* do not just cause shame and dishonor, they are wretched (*malditos*). In much the same way, people who spread a disease are described as 'infected' – a strongly negative term – in the Spanish and French translations of *Carriers*, and somebody annoying is an enemy in the translation of *Domestic disturbance*. The Spanish noun *resacón* contains a suffix which means 'very much' (-ón) and thus has a strengthening effect with regard to the source expression 'very bad trip'.

Sometimes strengthening takes place through word addition. The prefix *super* ('very good') qualifies the Beverly Hills cop; *gran* ('great') describes the hero of *About a boy*; the policemen in the film *The other Guys* are 'very bad', and the neighbors in the film with the same title are described as 'damn' (*malditos*) and 'the worst' (*pires*) in the Spanish and French version, respectively.

Mitigation is illustrated by the following titles, in which an element weakens the meaning of the source words:

<i>Cruel intentions</i>		<i>Sex intentions</i>
<i>Guilty as Sin</i>	<i>El abogado del diablo</i>	<i>L'avocat du diable</i>
<i>The Dirty Dozen</i>	<i>Doce del patíbulo</i>	<i>Les 12 Salopards</i>

Mitigation is achieved by replacing a negative word by a descriptive term ('cruel' by 'sex'). In other cases the negative expression is simply removed from the title. Thus the expression 'guilty as sin', which like all similes has a heightening effect, is replaced by a noun expression in which the attribute of guiltiness is lost. The same holds for 'dirty dozen', where the adjective 'dirty', which describes the protagonists, is substituted by a reference to the location of the action (*patíbulo* 'gallows').

The translation of film titles can also be motivated by cognitive operations based on the 'stands for' relation. Expansion, reduction and parametrization give rise to metonymic relations. Metonymic expansion and reduction is based on the part-whole organization of a domain, while other metonymic relations involve part-for-part relationships, i.e. one subdomain within a domain stands for another subdomain within the same domain. Expansion and reduction lie at the basis of the translation of film titles into Spanish:

- Expansion:

<i>Jaws</i>	<i>Tiburón</i>	<i>Les dents de la mer</i>
<i>Million Dollar Arm</i>	<i>El chico del millón de dólares</i>	
<i>8 mm</i>	<i>Asesinato en 8 mm</i>	
<i>Green card</i>	<i>Matrimonio de conveniencia</i>	

- Reduction:  
Teen wolf      *De pelo en pecho*  
The chase      *Acosados*

Expansion may be based on the metonymy A PERSON/ANIMAL FOR A BODY PART, as shown by the Spanish titles *Tiburón*, the shark standing for its jaws, and *El chico del millón de dólares*, where the boy stands for his arm. Interestingly, in French the jaws are replaced by another body part (teeth).

Sometimes the target title instantiates the cognitive operation of expansion by providing access to the whole domain rather than a specific element of it. The titles *Asesinato en 8 mm* and *Matrimonio de conveniencia* show the action frames on which the films are based (a murder and a marriage, respectively), whereas the English titles focus on particular frame elements. Thus, ‘green card’ (the US permanent resident card) points to the purpose of the convenience marriage between the protagonist couple: the hero gets married in order to get the green card he needs if he is to stay in America.

Other target titles exemplify reduction. Reduction may operate in two ways. On the one hand, the target title may highlight a physical attribute of the entity referred to in the original title. Thus the Spanish version of *Teen wolf* highlights the animal’s fur. On the other hand, the target title may focus on a specific element of the frame suggested by the source title. This type of reduction is illustrated by the title *Acosados*, which designates some participants in the chase referred to in the English title.

It is worth noting that expansion and reduction are at work only in Spanish, while in French zero translation prevails.

A further type of ‘stands for’ relation is parametrization, i.e. a particular type of expansion in which a specific subdomain stands for a generic domain. Parametrization underlies the translation of the following titles:

<i>The notebook</i>	<i>El diario de Noa</i>	<i>The notebook</i>
<i>The Frighteners</i>	<i>Agárrame esos fantasmas</i>	<i>Fantômes contre fantômes</i>
<i>Bad boys</i>	<i>2 policías rebeldes</i>	<i>Bad boys</i>
<i>American Hustle</i>	<i>La gran estafa</i>	<i>American Bluff</i>
<i>Meet the Fuckers</i>	<i>Los padres de él</i>	<i>Mon beau-père, mes parents et moi</i>

The Spanish titles provide a specification of the English titles. Thus *policías* specifies the occupation of the ‘boys’ in the English title; *El diario de Noa* specifies the kind of notebook referred to in the English film and its author; ghosts (*fantasmas/fantômes*) are the frightening entities mentioned in the English title, and *estafa* narrows the meaning of ‘hustle’, which has several meanings ranging from illegal ways of making money to a dance craze in the 1970s.

Generic terms may be used instead of proper names (‘parents’ for ‘the Fuckers’). This can be due to the fact that proper names are culture-specific.

Cases of comparison seem to be rare. We only found three film titles motivated by contrast. The film *What lies beneath* is translated into French by *Apparences* ‘Appearances’, which designates what is visible. The same holds for the Spanish title *Antes de despertar*, which stands in contrast with the original title *Before I go to sleep*. This type of contrast relies upon Schank and Abelson’s (1977) notion of script. A script is a structure that describes appropriate sequences of events in a particular context or a predetermined sequence of actions that defines a common situation, e.g. ‘eating in a restaurant’ and ‘starting a car’. Within this framework, the script ‘going to bed’ would consist of three events, namely getting into bed, sleeping for a few hours, waking up and getting up. While the English title focuses on the whole script, the Spanish title highlights a specific event within the script.

Another example of contrast is provided by *Un canguro superduro* ‘A very strict baby-sitter’, the Spanish translation of the film *The Pacifier*. While the English title highlights the purpose of the protagonist, i.e. to settle disputes in a household, the Spanish title puts the emphasis on his strict behavior. As a result, the source and target titles seem to clash semantically.

Table 2 presents the frequency of use of the cognitive operations discussed above in the Spanish and French film titles:

Cognitive operation	Spanish titles	French titles	Total percentage
Strengthening	9	4	6,5%
Mitigation	2	3	2,5%
Expansion	7	1	4%

Reduction	2	----	1%
Parametrization	5	4	4,5%
Contrast	2	1	1,5%

Table 2. Frequency of use of cognitive operations in the translation of English film titles into Spanish and French.

Three considerations are to be made concerning the cognitive basis of the translation of film titles into two target languages. First, cognitive operations account for the translation of 40 titles (20%). This is not a low percentage given the tendency to keep the original title or translate it literally. Second, cognitive operations seem to work more often in the Spanish titles. Third, these cognitive operations serve a pragmatic purpose. The SPECIFIC FOR GENERIC type of metonymic reduction increases the informative weight of the title by providing further clues about what the film is about and sometimes about the genre. If the title *The Frighteners* may make the audience believe that it is a horror film, the target titles, particularly the Spanish title (*Agárrame esos fantasmas*), clearly show that it is a comedy. Some instances of mitigation seem to fulfil the same function. *Doce del Patíbulo* reveals the setting, while *El abogado del diablo* shows that the attribute ‘guilty’ actually applies to a lawyer, thus indicating that it is judicial film. Strengthening has a different pragmatic function: it is intended to raise the audience’s interest in viewing the film. This operation increases the communicative impact of the film title by making it more striking.

### 3. Conclusion

In the present article we have attempted to cast some light on the cognitive operations which underlie the translation of film titles. We have shown that the translation of English film titles into Spanish and French can be accounted for in terms of some of the cognitive operations proposed by Ruiz de Mendoza and Galera (2014), namely strengthening, mitigation, expansion, reduction, parametrization and contrast. The use of these operations is pragmatically meaningful inasmuch as they contribute to the referential and expressive function of film titles.

Given the limited scope of this paper, further research into the cognitive motivation of the translation of film titles needs to be done on the basis of large corpora.

### References

- Díaz Teijo, J. T. (1997). La traducción en los títulos de películas del inglés al castellano: Procedimientos y resultados. In J.M. Santamaría et al. (Eds.), pp. 131-141.
- Hernández Bartolomé, A. I., & Mendiluce Cabrera, G. (2005). Tradúcelo como puedas: el título de las películas y su traducción inglés/español. In M.A. García Peinado et al. (Coords.), *El español, lengua de cultura, lengua de traducción : aspectos teóricos, metodológicos y profesionales: IV Simposio Internacional Traducción, Texto e Interferencias* (pp.559-569). Granada y Cuenca: Ediciones Atrio y Universidad de Castilla La Mancha.
- Hurtado Albir, A. (2001). *Traducción y Traductología*. Madrid: Cátedra.
- Jiménez Serrano, O. (1997). El peso de la ausencia: el papel del traductor en la adaptación al español de los títulos de largometrajes en inglés. In E. Morillas & J.P. Arias (Eds.), *El papel del traductor* (pp. 293-318). Salamanca: Ediciones Colegio de España.
- Luján García, C. I. (2010). La traducción como herramienta útil en un mundo globalizado. Un análisis de títulos de películas de origen angloamericano traducidos al español”. *Trickster* 8. Available at [http://trickster.lettere.unipd.it/doku.php?lingue\\_future:garcia\\_traducccion](http://trickster.lettere.unipd.it/doku.php?lingue_future:garcia_traducccion).
- Navarro Rodríguez, A. (1997). Acerca de la traducción de títulos de películas. In J.M. Santamaría et al. (Eds.), pp. 257-263.
- Newmark, P. (1991). *About Translation*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Rojo, A., & Ibarretxe-Antuñano, I. (Eds.). (2013). *Cognitive Linguistics and Translation. Advances in some Theoretical Models and Applications*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, F.J., & Galera Masegosa, A. (2014). *Cognitive Models and Cognitive Operations: Levels of Representation and Explanatory Adequacy* [Human Cognitive Processing 45]. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Santaemilia, J. (2000). Los títulos de los filmes en lengua inglesa y su traducción al español: ¿Un caos intercultural?. *Studies in English Language and Linguistics*, 2, 203-218.
- Santamaría, J.M. et al. (Eds.). (1997). *Trasvases culturales: Literatura, cine, traducción*. Vitoria: Departamento Filología Inglesa y Alemana. Universidad del País Vasco.
- Schank, R. C., & Abelson, R. (1977). *Scripts, Plans, Goals, and Understanding*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum.
- Serrano Fernández, L. (2001). La traducción de los títulos de películas inglés-español en un contexto determinado y determinante: España 1975-1980. *Sendebarr*, 12, 153-178.